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A 2026 with more flotillas and fewer double standards

The genocide perpetrated by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza¹ is ongoing and unlikely to stop in 2026. Unfortunately, unlike with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has overwhelmingly sided with the aggressor: Israel. The asymmetrical response to the two conflicts has exposed the racism and double standards of the EU regarding the defence of international law and human rights, particularly evident in the discourses of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.² Culturally, unlike Russia, which was banned from most international sporting competitions, as well as cultural events such as Eurovision, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Israel continues to be welcome in the international arena. This is despite the November 2024 arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and the ongoing genocide case against Israel put forward by South Africa in the International Court of Justice.

What can we expect for 2026? From the EU institutions, very little. Commission President von der Leyen continues to support Israel, even if, in her September 2025 State of the Union, she proposed a partial suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement – a proposal that was quickly suspended after US President Donald Trump's so-called ceasefire agreement in October 2025. Similarly, most international cultural and sporting events are likely to continue welcoming Israel, starting with the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics in February. Israel has been confirmed as a participant in Eurovision, although the Dutch, Icelandic, Irish, Slovenian and Spanish broadcasters have already announced their boycott of Eurovision 2026 on the grounds of the participation of Israel.³ Luckily for FIFA, Israel has not qualified for the 2026 Men's Football World Cup, which will take place in Canada, Mexico and the USA. The participation of Israel in cultural and sporting events

1 "Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory: 'You feel like you are subhuman': Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza". Amnesty International, 5 December 2024; "Our genocide". B'Tselem, July 2025.

2 Oleart, A. and J. Roch (2025) "The colonial imaginary of 'Europe' in the EU's asymmetrical response to the Russian and Israeli aggressions: Ukraine as a member of the 'family' whilst 'othering' Palestine". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 6(63): 1685-1709. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13719

3 O'Carroll, L. (2025) "Iceland becomes fifth country to boycott Eurovision 2026 over Israel". *The Guardian*, 10 December.

is relevant because it contributes to legitimising its political actions, precisely the argument used by institutions such as the European and global football associations, UEFA, and FIFA to justify the exclusion of Russia in February 2022 from its competitions: “Football is fully united here and in full solidarity with all the people affected in Ukraine”. Why is that solidarity selective? Where is the solidarity with the people affected in Palestine?

Where can we find hope, then? Social movements, trade unions, civil society and some governments have successfully mobilised around the world in solidarity with Palestine. The Global Sumud Flotilla brought together nearly 500 activists from dozens of countries worldwide, aiming to break the Gaza blockade and deliver humanitarian aid to Palestinians by sailing through the Mediterranean. The flotilla was intercepted by Israeli forces on 3 October 2025, and there was a wide response, triggering protests across Europe and worldwide, including in Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Brasilia, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Sydney and Tunis, and Italian unions called for a general strike in solidarity with Palestine. This type of transnational collective action is a source of hope and opens the possibility of imagining a world where democracy, international law and justice prevail over colonialism and racism.

EU leaders are unlikely to break away from their longstanding support for Israel by themselves, but democratic mass mobilisations may change that. Ultimately, if institutions are unable to hold accountable a government that is perpetrating a genocide, it is up to social movements to mobilise across borders to put pressure on institutions to change course, including in the EU. This is relevant not only for Palestine, but for fostering civic space more broadly within and beyond Europe. Indeed, a coalition of European civil society organisations condemned the repression that followed the protests in solidarity with the Global Sumud Flotilla in multiple European countries. The failure of EU institutions and its member states to protect the Palestine solidarity movements “legitimises the criminalisation of non-violent civic engagement and undermines confidence in Europe’s genuine commitment to protect human rights defenders consistently, both within and beyond its borders”.⁴

Beyond the double standards on Palestine, the von der Leyen II Commission already uses the right-wing majority in the European Parliament, with an important component of far-right MEPs, and a majority of conservative governments in EU member states, to push for a deregulation agenda that may water down existing regulations on climate, workers’ rights or digital human rights, as argued by a coalition of 127 civil society organisations in November 2025.⁵

The second Trump presidency is only putting more pressure in this direction. Hence, in 2026, we need political actors to foster collaborations across political parties, trade unions, civil society and social movements to build an internationalist progressive alternative that cuts across both transversally (across different issues, from labour rights and trade unions to Palestine, migrants’ rights, gender equality or environmental issues) and transnationally

4 Civil Liberties Union for Europe, EuroMed Rights, European Civic Forum et al. (2025) “Wave of civic activism in support of Global Sumud Flotilla met with shocking repression: EU leaders must uphold right to protest”. Joint statement. European Civic Forum.

5 “Joint statement: The EU must uphold hard-won protections for digital human rights”. Amnesty International, 13 November 2025.

(across national borders and not only within the EU, bringing activists from the Global North and the Global South together).

We can only hope that 2026 will bring more of the transnational, anti-colonial and democratic energy that fuels the flotillas and less of the deregulatory agenda and double standards.